

Lead Left Interview – Chris Ullman (Part 2)

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This week we continue our conversation with Chris Ullman, Managing Director and Director of Global Communications at The Carlyle Group. Prior to Carlyle, Chris was Director of Communications at the US Office of Management and Budget, and before that, Director of Public Affairs for the SEC. He is author of the soon-to-be-published memoir and inspirational book, [“Find Your Whistle: Simple Gifts Touch Hearts and Change Lives.”](#) Second of two parts – [View part one](#).

The Lead Left: You have a great story in the book about whistling for President George W. Bush [\[link\]](#).

Chris Ullman: When I was the OMB spokesperson back in 2001 I was invited to whistle at Andy Card’s birthday party. He was the President’s chief of staff. I knew his press secretary, Ari Fleischer, but all the other people I had only seen on TV: Karl Rove, Condoleezza Rice, and Josh Bolton.

Later the President got wind of my whistling and asked my boss, Mitch Daniels, to “bring him over.” That’s what happened. I walk into the “Oval” – that’s what they call it there – and there’s Bush sitting behind the desk with an unlit cigar, feet on the desk. He gets up, and says “Would you like to stand? Sit? Need some water?” I stayed there for twenty minutes. All sort of people were walking in – Dick Cheney, Andy Card, Alberto Gonzalez. It was pretty cool.

TLL: How do you make giving back part of your 9 to 5 existence?

CU: Whistling is not an addendum to my life. It’s part of my life. I can go into my co-CEO’s office here at Carlyle and whistle happy birthday and he enjoys it. I’m giving a concert for our employees in July and will reprise my TED talk [\[link\]](#). It can’t be an afterthought. It’s far more satisfying than I ever imagined.

Think of it as a “skeleton key” that allows entry into everyone’s heart. Of course it doesn’t always work. I was in an elevator once with John Kasich and Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich. Kasich was House Budget Committee Chairman at the time. He tells Newt, “Hey, did you know Chris is a champion whistler?” Newt says nothing, no reaction. I completely shrink into the corner of the elevator.

Same thing happened at Carnegie Hall. I was there for the 25th Anniversary of Louis Rukeyser’s *Wall Street Week*. I’m backstage with Arthur Levitt [former Chair of the SEC], Dick Grasso [head of the NYSE], and Sandy Weill [CEO of Citigroup] waiting to go on. Arthur snaps his finger at me and says, “Whistle for us!” Neither Grasso nor Weill had a reaction. I’m thinking, either my skeleton key is broken, or they don’t have a heart! I guess it’s kind of binary. You either love it, or you hate it.

TLL: Is your dream to whistle at Carnegie Hall?

CU: My dream is to whistle on Jimmy Kimmel’s show. That would sell a lot of books. Or *Ellen*. Or *The Daily Show*. *Colbert* would be great to.

TLL: So Chris, let's talk a bit about your day job. What's it like being in charge of communications at one of the largest, most prestigious private equity firms in the world?

CU: Well, first of all we have great team. There are twelve professionals who cover all our media relations, branding, and website. It's a fantastic team. The key is having a clear idea of what you are trying to accomplish. For us it's about trust. You can't just say, "Trust us!" It's about performance, ethics, a global platform and deep industry expertise. Through those things we earn our investors' trust.

Of course it helps to have someone like David Rubenstein out and about all the time. His professional integrity and personal philanthropy really helps to humanize the place. It's not about rich people, but about community. Working for David also has its benefits. He paid to refurbish the Washington Monument after the 2011 earthquake. As a result, I got to whistle "Yankee Doodle Dandy" on the top of the Washington Monument, on the outside...right at the tippy top [[link](#)]. That was amazing.

TLL: You've helped keep Carlyle on a very high level from a PR perspective for a long time. Private equity in general could use some advice as to how to attract more positive media coverage.

CU: It helps that we're accessible. We're straight-shooters. We believe in the value and integrity of our products and services. Humility envelopes all of this. Great communications is about clarity and consistency. "I'm a tugboat, not a speedboat." I can turn around a big barge in time, a speedboat can't. It's not rocket science. It's about dealing with the ups and downs with integrity.

TLL: So why does private equity get such a bad rap from the media?

CU: A lot of it is lazy journalism. It's the Wall Street/Main Street dichotomy. Too many people focus on the extraordinary wealth of finance executives, but it's really the wrong emphasis. We do a lot of good for public pensioners. Unfortunately the media is famous for "comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable." We have gobs of great stories of value creation, but the media prefer the one-offs where things don't go well.

TLL: Considering your years of experience in the nation's capital, I'm sure our readers would love to hear what you would advise the current occupant in terms of better public relations.

CU: The key is to put the public interest first. Always tell the truth. Put failure in context. And think of the great that can be done by reaching across the aisle and building bridges.

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